

Draw One in the Dark

BY WALTER DE LEON.

Humor, Love and the Hunted Criminal.

JANE ran the late shift at T-Bone Mahoney's, a dance, every night from 7:30 till 2. Which was why almost any night you'd see Flash Fanchon, the featherweight; Spider Welsh, the jockey, and Silent Sam Simmons, who ran the poolroom up the street, dropping in for a cup of Java and a kidding match with Jane. And always standing outside between trips was the taxi belonging to Louis Spinoza, whose mother was still banking his savings only because Jane had had a pint of blood to spare the time the old lady was in the hospital.

Big Bill Wyse, the headquarters detective, who looked at the cup of coffee she gave him one night and shook his head.

"Don't give me no cracked cup," he said, shoving it away. "It's bad luck. I ain't going to drink out of no cracked cup for a couple of weeks anyway. I got a hunch about five thousand berries is going to fall my way and I don't want to discourage it none."

"Where's it going to fall from?" asked Jane, filling up another cup for him.

Big Bill lowered his voice. "The K. guy. A yegs the bankers' association is offering five thousand to meet."

"Check-passer?" I asked.

Big Bill nodded. "Cashied four thousand dollars' worth of checks on the First National Bank of Lulliston, W. Va., before anybody thought to ask was there a First National in Lulliston. There wasn't. He was J. K. Kirkwood on them checks. That was in New York. Pittsburgh doctors about three thousand to M. M. Milliken. On his way to Chicago he stops off at Cincinnati and collects ten thousand on doctors' certified checks payable to R. K. Keane. Always a K in the name somewhere, see?"

"What does he look like?" Jane asked.

"He don't look the same in any two towns," Bill grinned. "In New York he was a banker in town for the bankers' convention. In Pittsburgh he was a salesman for a Connecticut hardware concern. In Cincinnati he showed pretty letters of credit and Spanish introductions from Buenos Aires. He spent two weeks in New Orleans waiting on tables in the restaurant across from the jail, listening to the plans the chief of police and the dicks were making to capture him. He left a note thanking the boys for the information."

"What makes you think he's coming this way?" Jane asked.

"They almost got him in San Antonio, Tex., a month ago, but he gaily jumps into the river and swims a get-away in the dark. A week later some K checks appear in El Paso, but when they go for him he ain't there. New Orleans, San Antonio, El Paso—the next stop is Los Angeles, ain't it?"

Bill eased down off his stool. "Night, Pete. I'll drop you a postal card from San Diego, Jane. I'm going down there on a week's job."

"Talking about jobs," I said, "my helper quit me this afternoon. Found out if any of the boys need a couple of weeks' work, Jane."

AS Jane walked toward the other end of the counter I turned toward the door. Outside was a little chap, maybe twenty-five or so, his big brown eyes following Jane. As I watched him, he took off his cap, opened the door and dragged himself in. His eyes were sunk back into his head and his chin was tucked toward his face and hands were clean, but I saw the red and black rim under his collar that comes from the drive and sting of dirt and pebbles chucked at a bo riding the rods of a fast-moving Pullman. He sat down at the long counter.

"May I share your table, mister?" There was a squint in his eye and a comical break in his high-pitched voice that would make any one grin. I offered him a cigarette. Refusing it, he waited for Jane to finish talking to Flash Fanchon. Then he spoke up in his funny way.

"Ah! 'Tis a good idea! They keep you waiting here till anything they serve you tastes good."

Jane turned around and gave the little chap a calm and cool look. He smiled.

"I beg your pardon, but is there a waitress around the place that could give me a little service?"

Jane's lips twitched.

"Where do you think you are—in a restaurant?" Jane inquired. "What would you like?"

"I'm not very thirsty; just give me a veal cutlet breaded, in a long glass."

Jane's eyes snapped. "How will you take it—with a straw or a spoon?"

"Neither," he answered. "Make it a lynch—"

He suddenly swayed and lurched over against me. I straightened him up and flipped a little water in his face. He opened his eyes.

"Make it a hypo so I can inject it," he finished.

But Jane had a bowl of soup in front of him and milk toast, a chop and tea ordered before the little bo had the water wiped off his face.

A crowd came in and Jane was kept hopping for awhile. Only one question did she get time to ask. "Sick, buddy?"

He shook his head. "Not any more. I caught the flu in Syracuse a month ago and the Doc advised the sun-kissed beauties of Southern California for six months. So I came straight to you."

"You could do done worse," Jane said, walking away. I knew she was thinking of the K guy.

"Where tea?" Jane asked him when the crowd thinned out.

"No, thanks. Where's your bouncer?"

"What do you mean?"

"I could walk out of course, but I believe in making bouncers earn their money."

"You mean you're not going to pay for what you've eaten?"

"If the check was a nickel I couldn't pay a deposit on it," he grinned.

Jane rang up the amount of the

stranger's bill; from her apron pocket she took the money and tossed it into the till. Pulling out the receipt stub she shoved it and a pencil toward the little fellow.

"Can you spell your own name?" she asked, easy. The little fellow looked at her then.

"K. A. Walker," he wrote.

"Thanks," said Jane. "What's the K for?"

"Kid, to you," said the little lad.

"All right, Kid," she said. "Now, listen, I'll leave word with Jake to give you a cup of coffee in the morning."

HE looked up at her quickly, then grinned. "Much obliged, Miss Jane. But I'll have me a job before I get hungry again."

"A job?" Jane flashed me a look.

"You've got a job, Kid, if you want it," I said, "helping me shoot film on the Idol lot. There's a hot bath and a cool bed waiting for you at my hotel, too. How about it?"

"I've croaked," said the little fellow softly. "I've croaked and gone to heaven. Come on, St. Peter. Good night, angel. I'm going to dream about you."

Out he went, shaking his head, puzzled-like.

"Will I locate Big Bill or one of the boys from headquarters?" I whispered to Jane. Her gray eyes turned dark and hard as slate. "If I hear of you tipping off anybody that the Kid is the K guy, you're going to change eating places or suffer an autopsy." Her voice softened. "I'll take care of the Kid, Pete. Leave him to me."

"How's the Kid making out with the company?" Jane asked me after the Kid's first week.

"Aces," Tom Kush says he's going to make a director out of him and the boss threatens to put him in the office."

Jane's eyes glanced at the Kid chinning with Louis Spinoza.

"He's getting real plump, don't you think?"

I grinned. "He's fatter than this here old Egyptian mummy the papers have been printing so much about."

Billy Murray, the demon reporter, coming in for his usual cup of coffee, told us: "I interviewed a decadent of his this afternoon."

"He pointed to an article on the second page, which announced the fact that Prince Ptolemy Ptarmigan, etc., etc., who traced his ancestry back to the mummy, had stopped off for a few days in our beautiful city on the tour of the world he was making following his graduation from an English university."

WELL, naturally, Monday morning there were nineteen autos drawn up in front of the prince's hotel, nineteen men inside inviting the prince to visit their own particular studio, and on the sidewalk, nearly a dozen cameras focused on the front doors. When the prince finally emerged with my boss, nineteen shutters started taking sixteen exposures per second of a dapper-dressed young putty colored gent with a vacant eye. Taking off his hat, he uncovered long sleek black hair, parted in the middle, and a pair of straight, toward large, unornamental ears. And then he screwed a monocle into his left eye and emitted "Extraordinary!" in hand-picked Piccadilly accents.

"So that's all that's left of a long line of kings," grinned the Kid at my elbow. Looking at a genuine Egyptian he began to wonder why Cleopatra fell for a foreigner. Why do you suppose he picked on our outfit?"

In the car on our way back to the studio I explained to the Kid that the idol company would soon be pulling an Egyptian Nile and an straight toward idly given Tut-ankh-Amon.

"We'll take the action scenes and close-ups here in California," I told him, "and fill out the rest of the picture with long shots of the pyramids, the Sphinx, the muddy banks of the Nile and any other suitable scenes we can buy from the news weekly companies' libraries. I suppose the boss beat the bunch by asking the prince for his personal advice and suggestions."

"Kidding himself or the prince?"

"Kidding himself," the kid grinned. "The kid's following the prince all over our lot, will bring heavy money from aforementioned news weekly companies."

THE next afternoon we escorted our distinguished visitor into the projection room to show him how he looked to others. I was surprised to hear behind me in the dark room the boss's voice while the film was being run off.

"I wish I knew some way to persuade your highness to play the leading part in my new picture. I realize that money is no object."

"My dear sir, the amount of money you offer would always be an object. But it is the time, as I have explained. I am due to sail upon the eve, I forget the exact date. My secretary would know."

"Couldn't you postpone sailing?" the boss urged. "It will take our Mr. Kush not more than three weeks to complete the scenes you would appear in. Three weeks—two here and another in Mexico."

"Mexico?"

"There is a location a few miles from Tia Juana which is ideal for our purpose. It has the heat haze noticeable in all genuine Egyptian desert film."

"Fascinatingly interesting, of course. But Mexico—it's dirty, I've always heard."

"I assure you your highness would not be uncomfortable. It would require no more than five days—and, of course, all expenses, including a special Pullman car two for the coast, will be borne by the company."

"By Jove, it would be rather a lark. I think—yes, I'll do it. I'll get a telegram off to Lord Moncton immediately."

"Lord Moncton?"

"Of the British legation at Washington. He's by way of being your sponsor here in this country, do you see? Furnishes the whereabouts and that sort of thing. By Jove, I mustn't neglect to inform my secretary to change sailing arrangements."

Oh, I say, you mustn't expect his

tronic ability of me. I utterly haven't any."

Four or five days later he showed

he utterly hadn't something else.

But, in the meantime Big Bill had

returned to Los Angeles and found

how thick the Kid and Jane had become.

"Last night there's some trouble

in the kitchen and Jane goes out to

fix it," according to Flash Fanchon.

"The Kid hops back of the counter,

takes off his coat, ties an apron

around him and tosses a napkin

under his arm when in blows Big

Bill.

"Where's Jane?" he asks.

"Behind the clock in Minnie's

room," cracks the kid.

"That'll be about all of that," Big

Bill growls. "Tell her Detective

Wyse would like to see her."

"Oh, Detective Wyse. Yes, sir. Can I give you a cup of coffee, detective, while you're waiting?"

"Bill grunts. The Kid rattles

around in the crockery and comes up

with a prize. The cup has a gouge

in the rim like somebody has taken

a bite out of it. And the saucer,

night, angel. I'm going to dream

about you."

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I DIDN'T get a chance to warn the Kid that he'd acquired an enemy until it was too late.

The day's work called for some

temse melodrama on and around an

Egyptian scow anchored near

Santa Monica. Tom Kush had run

things right up to the last scenes,

an exciting rescue stunt, and decided

he had time to finish up with the

ship stuff that day. That would let

us leave for Tia Juana early Tuesday morning.

"Now, prince," Tom explained to

Ptolemy Ptarmigan, "your agent

wants you to jump overboard to

escape the villain. You break away from the slaves holding

you, rush over to the rail here, jump

up on it and dive in after her."

The prince looked down at the

heaving ocean twelve or fourteen

feet below him.

"My dear chap, I can't dive."

"Well, then, jump in," said Kush

"It doesn't make much difference."

"But I—I can't swim, you see,"

announced his royal joblots, feeling

for his monocle and not finding it.

"That's all right," Tom insisted.

"I've got a couple of men down there

in a rowboat—for safety's sake. As

soon as you hit the water I'll cut

off my cameras, throw you a flock

of life-preservers and you can hang on

till the boat picks you up."

"Is—really, you know—is the scene

absolutely necessary?" He coughed.

"I've a touch of cold—"

"Very well, your highness," said

Tom. "I'll get some one to double for

you. All you'll have to do is run

across the deck and jump on the

rail."

His eye fell on the Kid. "Can you swim?"

"Sure."

"Want to double for the prince?"

"Sure," the Kid grinned.

Later he appeared on deck in the

prince's costume, a little black false

mustache on his lip contrasting

comically with his light hair.

"Oil your hair and part it in the

middle," Tom told him. "When it's

oiled and wet it will photograph as

dark as the prince's."

"Take your places," Tom called.

"Ready, everybody? Camera!"

Up and over went Morris. The

Kid didn't jump—he just lifted him-

self off the rail and floated far

in a swan dive. The little side-roll

he gave himself took him under

without a splash.

Up bobbed the Kid's head. In long,

strong strokes he cut through the

swells toward Morris. They splashed

around terrifically for a minute be-

fore starting toward shore.

But when the rowboat pulled out

the Kid helped Morris in and then

started swimming alongside it. Only

it wasn't swimming. It was all the

water stunts and clowning I'd ever

seen and a lot more.

I was telling some of the boys

about it early that night at T-Bone's

—the Kid volunteering to take my

camera out and turn in my film for

me, when Big Bill Wyse dropped in.

"A water-dog, eh?" Bill quietly

left the place. Then I remembered

about the K guy jumping into the

river in San Antonio.

"WHERE'S the Kid?" Jane asked

when she came on duty.

"He should have been here twenty

minutes ago," I said. "Something in

my expression made her ask, sharp,

"Is the Kid in trouble?"

"He wasn't the last time I saw

him. He—"

It was no use. I told her about Big Bill and everything as

soothingly as I could.

Eight o'clock—half-past—9 o'clock.

Still no sign of the Kid. I rang up

the studio. The Kid had come in

about 6 and left about 10. Twenty

minutes later. By 11 there wasn't

any color in Jane's face.

"Don't be silly, Jane," I told her.

"Everything's all right."

"Is it?" she asked. "You know my

little sister—worked at the switch-

board at the C. Hotel?" I nodded.

"They let her out this afternoon,

without giving her any reason at

all."

"Well?"

"Big Bill's cousin is the house

detective there."

"A few minutes' before 12, Jane

whispered, "listen Pete, will you ring

up headquarters and—"

She stopped dead, her eyes glued on

the door. Lurching through it, stum-

bling and feeling around like a blind